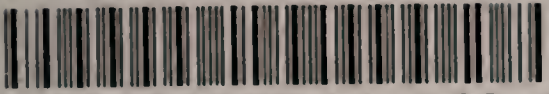


BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY



3 9999 08714 540 3



NANTUCKET AND THE WHALES.

The Albany Institute held one of its Field Meetings among the islands off Massachusetts and Rhode Island, in September, 1874, employing the steam boat *Granite State* to convey the party, consisting of more than one hundred persons. On the return trip the exercises were held on the boat, and the meeting being organized, the chairman called upon Mr. MUNSELL for some historical and antiquarian information concerning the region just visited.

Mr. Munsell said that the member who had been expected to speak in this department had been prevented from accompanying the expedition, and that he had not anticipated the alternative of filling the place himself. What little he might once have known respecting this vicinity (it was many years since he was last here), had pretty much passed out of his memory, and he could not recall enough of sufficient interest to occupy the time of the meeting.

He supposed that all present were aware of what had been pretty well settled, that the Northmen visited these shores in the tenth century and left one or more colonies known as Vinland; although there remained very few traces of their occupancy that could be identified in the remotest degree.

Respecting Nantucket, so long after the Northmen had ceased to inhabit the country, that no tradition of them remained among the Indians, the English navigator, Gosnold, in 1602, chanced to descry the island. Some forty years later, a company of speculators obtained a grant of it from the English claimants, and in 1659 the first settler went upon it. The Puritans had made it illegal to harbor a Quaker under a penalty of one dollar an hour

for the time he should remain under any one's roof. Thomas Macy was so unfortunate one day as to have four Quakers seek shelter in his house from a storm, who remained four hours. The offense did not escape the vigilance of the authorities, and he was fined sixteen dollars. This mandate weighed heavily upon the soul of Thomas. He paid the fine, but resolved to flee from civilization and New England. He sold his farm of one thousand acres (so the event is recorded), embarked his family and goods in a boat, and seeking the outermost verge of the continent, landed upon Nantucket. The island was then a forest wild, inhabited by fifteen hundred heathen salvages. Thomas came among them a stranger, without permission, leaving his countrymen to their pursuits, and to marvel at his impatience under discipline. Other families soon followed his example, and purchased the island of the natives, allowing them to remain and till as much of the land as they pleased. No rupture ever occurred between the two races, although the settlers had a struggle among themselves.

In process of time this people was destined to solve the problem in Job, whether Leviathan could be drawn out with a hook, or his jaw be pierced with a thorn! The quiet employment of agriculture was long pursued, till the island was denuded of its forest, when Leviathan approached the harbor, as if to challenge the cupidity of those isolated husbandmen. Anon plough-shares were beaten into harpoons and javelins, and they became mighty builders of ships. The elite of the menfolk in hundreds of sea-craft were resolved into a nation of whalers, and spread themselves over the waters of the whole earth. If as is alleged the ambition of every young American is to become president of the United States, so the acme of every Nantucketer's ambition was to strike a whale. A veteran whaler, speaking of the excitement attending the pursuit, and of his own experience, said that while quite young, on his return from a voyage in which he had been permitted first to attempt that perilous and responsible feat, he strutted through the streets feeling that every girl in Nantucket knew that he had struck a whale.

The less daring inhabitants pursued the peaceable occupation of shepherds, with such success that at one time the sheep on the island numbered nearly ten thousand. The annual shearing festival was so notable an event as to be made the subject of newspaper remark throughout the country.

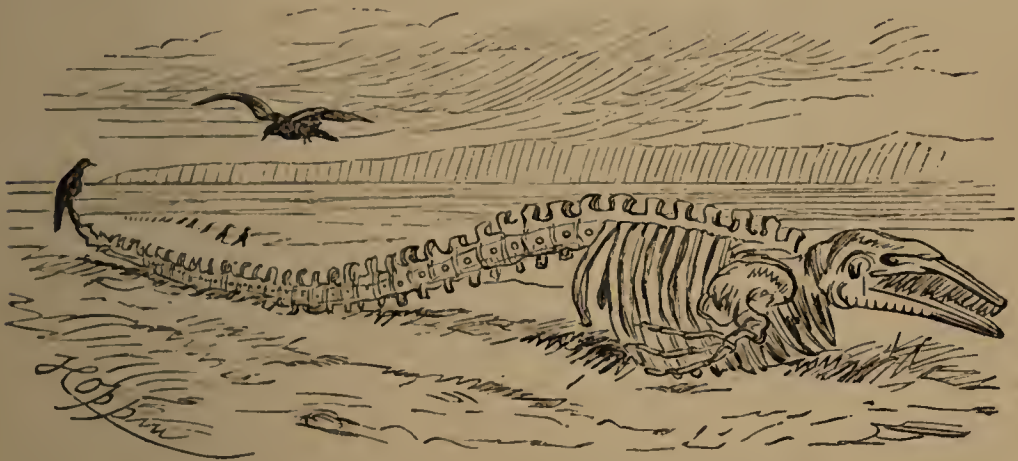
Of course it was impossible, he said, to give even a synopsis of the history of the island on such an occasion as the one present. Suffice it to mention that while this prosperity was at its height, the Indians who had been utilized in the whale fishery and other occupations, had dwindled away under dissipation and penury, and became extinct, the last one dying in 1822; the sheep, exposed to the bleak winds of the island and to neglect, wasted away; the whales, pursued into all waters, were exterminated, which brought that pursuit to an end; and so many of their pursuers were lost at sea, that the number of widows became a notable feature of the census. In fine, such a retribution seemed to settle over the prosperity of this island, that the population, numbering over 7,000, is now nearly reduced to 3,000, and *ichabod* is written upon its gates.

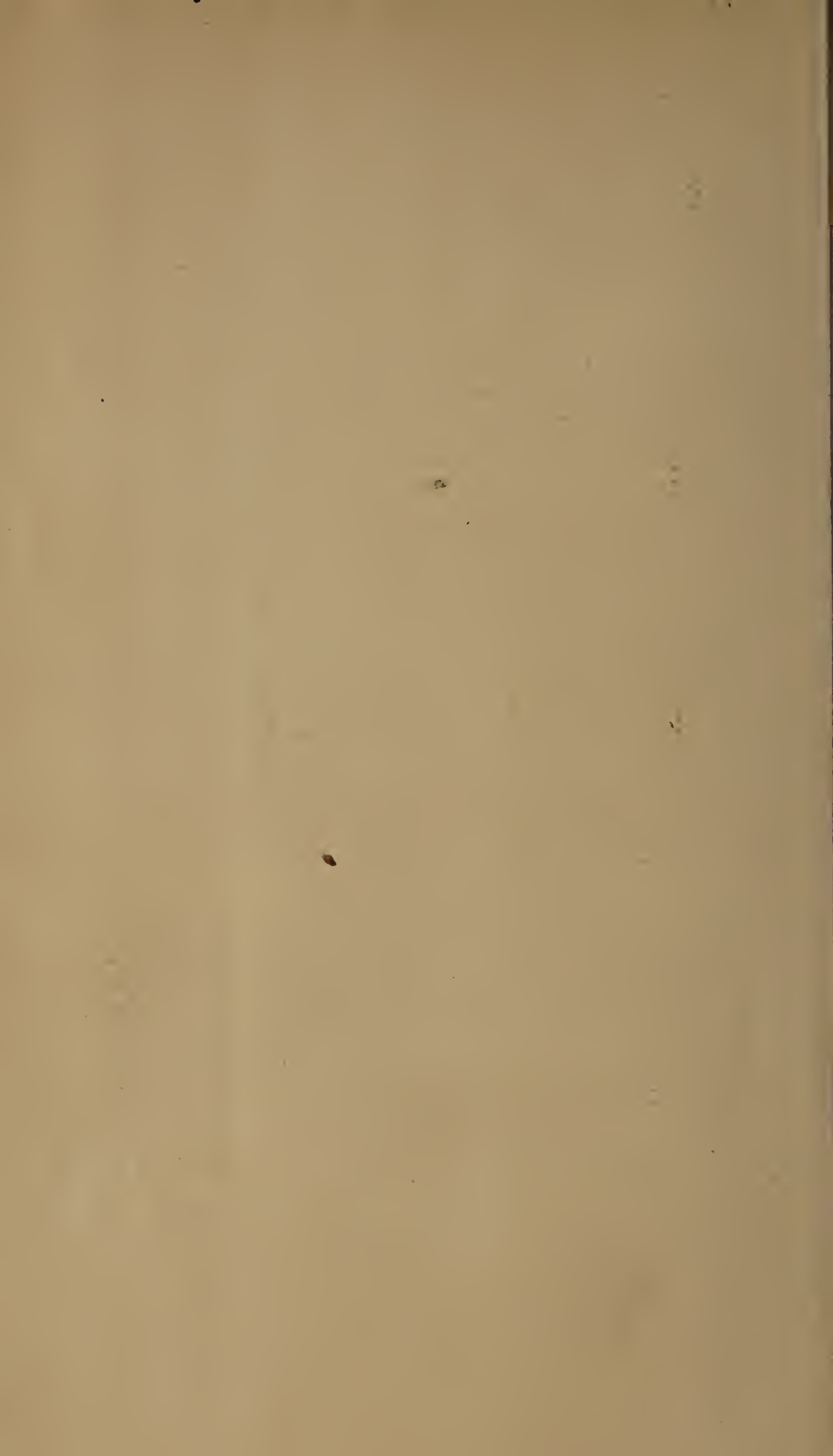
" But the ghost of the whale lingers still round the spot
 Where they tried out his blubber in cauldron and pot;
 And often dread blows break the silence of night,
 And the children start up with a terrible fright,
 And mammas in their nightcaps look ghastly with fear,
 As the sound from the ocean falls full on the ear.
 Well the old burghers know that the wandering shade
 Of the monster is roving and will not be laid,
 And though ages have passed since he gave his last groan,
 And no vestige remains of his vertebrate bone,
 Still the noise of those blows, as it breaks on the sense,
 Makes the breathing come hard, and the muscles grow tense;
 For then in mid-harbor the ghost of the whale
 Is flapping in madness his horrible tail." [Adapted from B. H. Hall.]

On being asked what there was reliable respecting the structure at Newport, known as the old stone mill, Mr. Munsell said there were various theories advanced, but nothing certain was known of its origin and use. Everything claimed for it was conjectural, and although a venerable and interesting relic, Mother Goose might be quoted as rationally as some other authorities:

" There was an old mill, that stood on the hill,
 And while it stands there, it also stands *still*. !
 About this old mill they tell many lies,
 And jump over hedges and scratch out their eyes,
 And then go home thinking they're wond'rous wise."

This quaint edifice has puzzled the antiquarians of all nations, and although some claim to have found a windmill in England of similar construction, it is stoutly defended by others against any such common usage, while the awe-struck antiquary approaches it with reverential homage as an *instoned mystery*, constituting the hardest nut that Father Time ever left his antiquarian children to crack.





FEB 24 1991

